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## EPA probes chemical contamination

### Says fumes from Morristown dry cleaners site may be problem

BY ROB SEMAN  
DAILY RECORD

MORRISTOWN -- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is investigating whether vapors from dry cleaning chemicals that seeped into the ground and groundwater beneath a former dry cleaners on Morris Street are entering nearby homes or businesses.

The EPA has taken samples beneath several businesses that now operate in the former VIP Dry Cleaners building at 89 Morris St., inside nearby businesses and under basements of nearby homes.

The agency expects results within the next month.

Spokeswoman Pat Seppi said the EPA's Pre-Remedial Group has been checking several sites throughout the state and in New York that have been home to businesses such as dry cleaners that use chemicals.

"We were concerned that some of the buildings are older there and have cracks, and (fumes) have ways to get into homes and businesses," Seppi said.

"We don't feel anybody right now is in danger, but it's something we want to find out about," Seppi said. "You just can't let this go."

EPA Regional Administrator Alan J. Steinberg in a statement: "The good news is, once we identify the problem, it's relatively straightforward to fix. We can install ventilation systems when necessary to get rid of trapped fumes."

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Seppi said the EPA is testing the entire area from Dunkin' Donuts, at Morris and Spring streets, to 24 Pine St. and the roller rink behind that property. That area includes 21 commercial buildings and 10 residential buildings. Not all of the property owners in the area have allowed the EPA to test their soil, Seppi said.

Dry cleaners use chemicals in their processes known as volatile organic compounds, the agency said. Compounds include tetrachloroethylene or perchloroethylene, or PCE, which can break down to trichloroethylene, or TCE, and 1,2-dichloroethylene, or DCE. PCE and TCE also are often referred to as PERC in the dry cleaning industry.

Seppi said the agency began to look at the site in November and discovered some amounts of trichloroethylene and dichloroethylene.

The dry cleaners is one of several tenants in a strip-mall building informally named Willmont Walk.

### History of the site

The building served as a commercial laundry starting in 1928. Morristown Memorial Hospital leased the space to do laundry from 1970 to 1980. Since then, there has been a succession of tenants, and the building was separated into a strip center of 10 units. A dry cleaners historically has been at the end of the strip facing Morris Street.

From 1989 to 1996, the dry cleaners was operated as VIP Cleaners, and then changed ownership and was named Milano French Cleaners from 1996 until it was purchased in 2001 by Brian Oh, who now operates New Image Cleaners and Tailoring.

While Seppi said she did not know exactly why the site was chosen, she said the EPA believes that the contamination occurred when the business was operated under VIP Cleaners, not under the owner's that operated it before or after.

Peter Austin, the owner of the strip, said the EPA investigated the site 15 years ago, after an oil tank was removed from the site and the agency found evidence of PERC contamination.

However, Austin said that while the presence of VIP Cleaners appeared suspect, the EPA was unable to link the business to the contamination.

But when the EPA arrived again a few months ago, Austin said he decided to no longer include businesses that use potential sources of contamination in the strip.

"I've had enough of it," Austin said.

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"They (Oh and his family) are nice people and I really hate to see this happen," Austin said. "They're good tenants, but I do not want to continue on with the EPA coming in."

#### Entrepreneur's view

Oh said on Friday that Austin had not mentioned the prior contamination to him -- only the oil tank. Austin said he cannot recall whether he specifically told Oh, but said that the owner of Milano knew, and that some reference of the contamination is in Oh's lease.

Oh and his family, who are from Korea, had owned dry cleaners in New York City and then in North Carolina before moving to the prime spot across from the train station on Morris Street in Morristown.

"It's urban enough, and people are nicer than in New York," Oh said of moving to New Jersey.

But Oh said he would not have moved his business to the site had he known about the contamination. Oh said he asked Austin about moving the business to an empty storefront at the other end of the strip, but that Austin has refused.

"Essentially, we are being penalized by what we weren't told," Oh said.

"There is nothing we can do now but ask him to be fair."

Other store owners in and next to the strip said EPA officials haven't disrupted business with the testing procedures. The fact that testing is going on hasn't concerned them much, either.

"Listen, there are so many chemicals in the world today you would be neurotic to think about it all the time," said Rob Kneller, a partner in Elite Photographers, one of the businesses there.

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